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Blacks in Golf

by
Wornie L. Reed

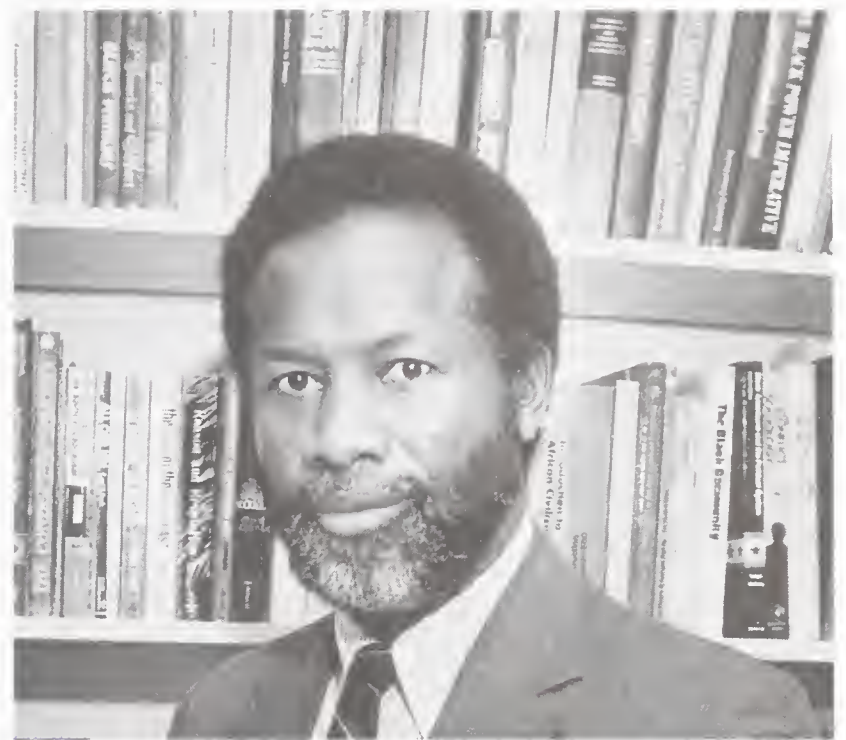
From 1961 until the mid-1980s a weekend ritual was repeated by many African Americans who follow golf. For these individuals, each weekend morning included a peek at the standings of the weekly Professional Golf Association (PGA) tournament printed in the newspaper to see how the black golfers were doing and whether any one of them was the tournament leader or was close enough to the lead to win the tournament. As the 1980s came to an end anyone still practicing the old ritual was doing so in vain. No blacks were winning tournaments on the regular PGA Tour, nor were they even challenging the tournament leaders because the regular professional tour included fewer African-American golfers than it had in the 1960s.

In 1961, when the PGA Tour finally relented and removed its “caucasians only” clause to permit blacks to become members and to play in the tournaments, the great Charlie Sifford started playing on the tour. At 39 years of age he was clearly past his prime—although that is hard to imagine considering his current success as a Super Senior on the Senior PGA Tour. Sifford suffered a number of racial insults and indignities in his early years on the tour. In some instances these indignities were reminiscent of those that Jackie Robinson had endured

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some 15 years earlier in integrating major league baseball; and in other instances they were worse, as hostile spectators would occasionally kick or step on his ball when it would land near them. This, of course, made it more difficult to play the ball, because a golfer must play the ball “as it lies,” and this treatment cost Sifford strokes, which cost him prize money.

By the mid-1960s more blacks were joining the PGA Tour, and by the end of the 1960s there were usually about eight or ten black players at each tour stop—players such as Sifford, Rafe Botts, Pete Brown, Jim Dent, Lee Elder, George Johnson, Charlie Owens, Curtis Sifford, Nate Starks, and Chuck Thorpe. In the 1970s as many as a dozen



blacks played the tour. Of course, casual followers of golf may not have known that there were as many blacks on the tour because they seldom saw them on television. The individual players shown on television are always the tournament leaders and the top few contenders; and although black golfers frequently won prize money, few of them actually won tournaments. Today there are only two blacks who are members of the regular PGA Tour—Calvin Peete and Jim Thorpe, Chuck Thorpe’s brother—and each of them is nearing the end of their most competitive years, as they are 47 and 42 years of age, respectively.

What’s happening here? Why is it that as more African Americans are becoming involved in other aspects of American life, the opposite trend is happening in golf—at least on the PGA Tour? Before examining this specific issue, let’s look at the long history of African Americans in golf.

The Early Years of Golf

Golf became the centerpiece of the country club movement during the 1800s in America.¹ This association with country clubs gave the sport an aura of exclusivity that still persists despite the great numbers of middle- and working-class people who play on public courses. Consequently, the participation of blacks in golf, as well as the participation of others outside the country club set, was limited in the early years of the sport, i.e., during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, blacks did play golf in those early years. In fact, a black person invented the golf tee, a very important event in the development of the game of golf.

Dr. George F. Grant, a prominent black dentist in Boston, patented the first golf tee in 1899. The golf tee is the small piece of wood with a slightly concave top on which the golf ball is placed for the first shot

on each hole. Before this invention, players constructed dirt tees by fashioning small mounds of dirt with their hands in the teeing area for each hole. Boxes of dirt would be placed at each hole to facilitate this procedure. Dr. Grant patented his tee, but he made no attempt to capitalize on his invention's popularity; rather, he gave the tees away to friends and fellow golfers.²

Another notable instance of African-American involvement in the sport's early years was their role as golf professionals. In 1895 John Shippen, the son of a native American mother and an African-American father, played and finished fourth in the second U.S. Open, the oldest major tournament in the United States and golf's most prestigious tournament.³ He and his brother, Cyprus, were teaching professionals at some of the most elite clubs in the country. John Shippen competed in professional tournaments for several years, but eventually—due to the strengthening of Jim Crow laws throughout the United States—he and other blacks were excluded from the tournaments.

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At the turn of the century, most blacks did not have access to private clubs, so they played at public courses—usually with restricted access. In 1926 a group of golf-playing black physicians from Washington, D.C., met in Stowe, Massachusetts, and organized the United Golf Association (UGA). (Blacks were banned from public courses in Washington.) Member clubs were organized, and national and local tournaments have been sponsored continuously since then. Originally, there were 26 member clubs, but black participation in golf steadily grew and in the 1930s there were some 50,000 black golfers.⁴ By the 1960s the UGA had nearly 90 member clubs and about 90,000 members.⁵

Blacks also found opportunities to play golf in the army and in colleges. Although most black college players were at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), some played and excelled at white Division I schools. For example, A. D. V. Crosby, a regular at UGA tournaments, won the all-campus golf event at the University of Michigan in 1930, and another black finished second. During the same period, George Roddy, an engineering student at the University of Iowa, was the number one player on that school's golf team. Later, in the 1950s, Forrest Jones, Jr., was the number one player on the Indiana University golf team, which pitted him in Big Ten matches against the number one players on opposing teams, including fellow collegians Jack Nicklaus and Tom Weiskopf.⁶ And in 1959, Billy Wright won the National Public Links champion-

ship, the top tournament for public course players, while he was a student at Western Washington College.⁷

Tuskegee Institute was the first HBCU with a golf course. They opened a three-hole course in the 1920s and expanded it into a nine-hole course in the 1930s. In 1938 Tuskegee sponsored the first black intercollegiate tournament with the following schools participating: Tuskegee, Alabama State, Florida A & M, Morehouse, and Morris Brown.⁸

Suing for Access

In the 1940s blacks began to sue to participate in golf. Black professionals sued to play in PGA tournaments and black amateurs and professionals sued to play on the public courses across the nation. The suits to open public courses to blacks generally took place in the segregated southern states. The first successful suit probably occurred in Baltimore in 1948 when a federal judge ruled that the local course for blacks was not of equal standard to the three public courses that were reserved exclusively for whites and ordered the “white” courses opened to blacks.⁹

The number of black golfers grew so rapidly after World War II that the segregated public courses could not accommodate the demand. Consequently, during the 1950s lawsuits were filed in a number of cities across the country. Although many of these suits were initiated before the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, that decision offered an added incentive to blacks who sought to use these municipal golf courses—public facilities subsidized with public tax monies, including black tax dollars. Several of the suits were successful, with success sometimes meaning the opening of public courses to everyone and at other times meaning the construction of new eighteen-hole courses for blacks.

The PGA Tour

Black professional golfers began suing the PGA in 1943. Several top players, including Bill Spiller and Ted Rhodes, sued for entry into the Richmond Open, a tour event in California that followed the Los Angeles Open by a week. Because that tournament was run not by the PGA, but by local organizations, these men had played in the Los Angeles Open alongside the major white stars. And, by finishing eleventh and twenty-fifth respectively, Spiller and Rhodes had qualified for the PGA event, the Richmond Open. In fact, Bill Spiller, who was heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis's personal instructor, had tied the great Ben Hogan with a 68 in the first of four rounds in the tournament.¹⁰ Despite their success in qualifying for the PGA event, these men were denied entry. They sued, and in an out-of-

court settlement the PGA agreed to drop its “caucasians only” policy. However, the PGA reneged on this agreement and did not actually drop this policy until 1961. In the fall of 1959 Charlie Sifford was granted a PGA card as an “approved player,” a classification usually reserved for foreigners.¹¹ He did not receive his Class A card until 1964.

Charlie Sifford was the “Jackie Robinson of golf.” He was the most famous black golfer between World War II and 1970. Between 1952 and 1960 Sifford won the UGA National Professional title six times. In 1957 he won the Long Beach (California) Open to become the first black player to win a significant title in a predominantly white event.

Sifford’s career was similar to that of his fellow black professionals. He started caddying at age nine; at age 13 he won a caddy tournament by shooting a 70. He later moved from Charlotte, North Carolina, to Philadelphia and became a teaching professional (for black entertainer Billy Eckstine, among others¹²) and chauffeur. Since golf was his love he played in the UGA and other local professional events, though neither were very lucrative ventures. He had to pursue chauffeuring and other odd jobs to make a living.

Pete Brown, from Jackson, Mississippi, joined the PGA Tour in the mid-1960s and became the first black player to win a PGA satellite event, the 1963 Waco Open in Oklahoma.¹³ In 1968 he won the San Diego Open, a regular PGA Tour event. Like Sifford, he also came up from the UGA and was a former caddy. He won the UGA professional title in 1961 and 1962, but chronic back problems hampered his playing and limited his career.

Lee Elder was the second black golfer to have a major impact on the PGA Tour. Elder, also a former caddy and a protege of Ted Rhodes, received his PGA card in 1967 as a 33-year-old rookie, after dominating the UGA Tour of professional tournaments and winning four UGA national professional titles between 1963 and 1967. Elder made a big splash on the PGA Tour in 1968, his first year, in a memorable five-hole “sudden death” playoff with Jack Nicklaus, which he lost. Elder went on to do very well on the tour and to eventually win four PGA Tour events in the 1970s.

By winning the PGA Monsanta Open in 1974, Elder qualified for and played in the 1975 Masters. However, his participation in the Masters was a result of a change in the rules rather than his accomplishment as an individual. The Masters tournament at Augusta National Golf Course in Augusta, Georgia, obtained its prestigious status by promotion and by being an invitation-only tournament. This tournament is not run by any of golf’s organized associations; it is run by the Augusta National Golf Club. From the beginning of the tournament in the 1930s all PGA tournament winners

from the previous year were invited to play along with all previous winners of the Masters tournament. In addition, a previous Masters winner could invite an otherwise ineligible player. This worked very well for Augusta National—which was so steeped in the plantation tradition that it permitted only black caddies until 1982—until 1967 when Charlie Sifford won the Hartford Open. In order to exclude Sifford the Masters changed its standing practice of inviting the previous year’s PGA winners and used other criteria, a remedy they repeated in 1968 when Pete Brown won the San Diego Open and again in 1969 when Charlie Sifford won the Los Angeles Open.

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After these episodes the PGA Tour demanded that the Masters establish and maintain a constant set of criteria for entry into the tournament, whereupon Augusta National decided to stick to the criterion of inviting all of the previous year’s PGA winners. The next victory by a black on the tour was by Elder in 1974, which automatically qualified him to play in the 1975 Masters. It should be noted that in the seven years that Elder was a top player but did not have the criterion victory, there were times that he, or Sifford or Brown, could have been invited to participate in the Masters by a previous winner (e.g., by Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, etc.). But they were never invited!

Elder joined the Senior Tour in 1984 and has been quite successful. He won more tournaments (seven) and more money on the Senior Tour in seven years than he won on the regular tour in sixteen years.¹⁴

Blacks on the PGA Tour had increased success in the 1980s, but by that time there were only two top African-American players, Calvin Peete and Jim Thorpe, as most of the older black golfers had gone to the Senior PGA Tour or faded from the scene, and few young black golfers were replacing them.

During the 1980s Calvin Peete became the most accomplished black golfer in history. After early struggles—it took three tries for him to earn his PGA card and four years after that to win his first tour victory—he became one of the best players in the world, winning 12 tournaments, including the prestigious Tournament Players Championship. Today, Peete is regarded as one of the straightest hitters in the history of golf; and during one three-year stretch during the 1980s he had more victories than any other player on the tour. Plagued by various

physical ailments in the late 1980s, however, Peete's success began to fade. Over \$2 million of his total earnings of \$2,297,385 were earned by 1987.¹⁵

Peete's background is different from that of most other black golfers. He was never a caddy, and he never played in the UGA. He was one of 19 children, born in Detroit and reared in Florida. As a young man he was an itinerant salesman, selling jewelry and other wares to migrant farm workers. He had never been on a golf course until he was in his twenties — a very late start for a top professional.

Had Gregory pursued a professional career in golf when the Ladies Professional Golfers Association was formed in 1950, she would have experienced the same struggle as the black male golfers since the LGPA also initially barred blacks.

Jim Thorpe, known for playing well on tough courses, hit his stride in the 1980s. He won three tournaments in the 1980s, and through 1990 had won \$1,530,466. A wrist injury and operation in 1987 limited his success from 1987 to 1989. He came back in 1990 to win \$211,297 in prize money.¹⁶

Black Women in Golf

The early black women golfing stars were amateurs — Ella Abel and Lucy Williams in the 1930s and 1940s and Thelma Cowan and Anne Gregory in the 1940s and 1950s. Abel won the UGA National Championship in 1934 and 1935; and Williams won in 1932, 1936, 1937, and 1946.¹⁷ Thelma Cowan won in 1947, 1949, 1954, and 1955. However, many observers place Anne Gregory of Gary, Indiana, as the best black woman golfer ever. She won the UGA national title in 1950, 1953, 1957, 1965, and 1966 (at age 49). In 1950, at 33 years of age she won six of the seven events she entered. Gregory did not aim for a professional career; she indicated that she preferred to stay with her husband and daughter and play golf for pleasure.¹⁸

Had Gregory pursued a professional career in golf when the Ladies Professional Golfers Association (LPGA) was formed in 1950, she would have experienced the same struggle as the black male golfers since the LGPA also initially barred blacks. To date only two black women have been members of the LPGA Tour. In 1967 Renee Powell became the first black woman on the LPGA Tour. She received the expected indignities — racial slurs and hate mail. She was joined on the LPGA Tour for a time by Althea Gibson, the great tennis star, who switched from tennis to golf when her tennis skills faded. Gibson enjoyed modest success on the tour, posting the only victory ever for a black woman.

What Happened to Black Professional Golf?

Today, some 30 years after blacks first played on the PGA Tour, their impact is less evident than ever before. When Sifford first entered the tour he began making significant showings. Although several years passed before he achieved his first victory, he was competitive, earning a fair amount of prize money. After Sifford, over a dozen black players entered the tour. Now in 1991 there are just two — and they are not playing that often or very well. What happened to the black players?

Two phenomena, more than anything else, are responsible for the decreased numbers of black golfers on the regular PGA Tour — the aging of earlier black professional golfers and the popularity of the golf cart. Most of the black players became involved in golf through caddying. However, in the past 25 years or so the golf cart has replaced caddies at most courses across the country. Consequently, the chances of learning golf through caddying has been almost eliminated.

If blacks are to reestablish a presence in the professional golfing world, more individuals must compete at the collegiate level.

That most of the top professional golfers were initially caddies is not unique to blacks. White golfers came up through the sport the same way, but a generation earlier. Until the Arnold Palmer era of the late fifties and early sixties, most white professional golfers had been caddies; since Palmer, however, most of the white golfing stars have come through the college ranks. For example, Ben Hogan, Sam Snead, and Byron Nelson, who were stars in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, did not come through the college ranks. Palmer, Billy Casper, and Jack Nicklaus did — and virtually everyone since. The transition from caddying to college among white golfers took place by the end of the 1950s, before the great transition from caddies to golf carts occurred. On the other hand, the black golfing stars of the 1960s and 1970s were from the caddy ranks.

Only a handful of blacks have ever played golf on teams at colleges that are not predominantly black. And HBCUs do not get invited to compete in the NCAA's Collegiate Golf Championships. Consequently, those blacks who do play in college do not play at the highest levels of collegiate competition. In an effort to provide more competition for black golfers at HBCUs a National Minority College Golf Championship began some five years ago. This effort, of course, is not a panacea. If blacks are to reestablish a presence in the professional golfing world, more individuals must compete at the collegiate level.

I should report here that, as often is the case, isolated instances of extremely talented individuals do arise in spite of the general trend that I have outlined. Fellow amateurs and touring professionals alike are currently raving over a young black golfer, Tiger Wood of Cypress, California, who almost qualified to play in the Los Angeles Open PGA event last winter.¹⁹ Wood, who turned 15 in December, continued his precocious play by becoming the third ranked junior amateur for 1990. (All other players in the top ten are 17 to 19 years of age.) Woods won his age group in the Optimist Junior World a record five times. And while still 14, he competed against junior players and won the Insurance National Youth Golf Classic, placed second in the PGA Junior, and reached the semifinals in the U.S. Junior.²⁰

Among black women, LaRee Sugg would appear to be the leading candidate for stardom on the LPGA Tour. Sugg was a young phenomenon, winning a number of national tournaments during her preteen and early teen years. She was elected to *Golf* magazine's all-American list when she was 12 and when she was 13 years of age.²¹ Currently, she is a member of the UCLA women's golf team, which is ranked third in the country. Sugg is ranked nineteenth among college women players.²²

In the 1950s the production of white male golfing professionals shifted locales, from the ranks of the caddies to junior tournaments and college competition. Black golf has not yet made this shift. The result is a greying black professional golfing pool and a greatly diminished number of top young black players. This phenomenon is occurring in spite of the fact that the number of black golfers is steadily

increasing. Since the caddy route is no longer viable, if there is to be any resurgence of interest in the game, more young blacks must enter the sport and participate in junior tournaments and play on college teams.

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